




Class Size and Self-Esteem as Determinants of Student Learning Outcomes in Essay Writing

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Abstract

This study was carried out mainly to investigate the effects of class size and self-esteem on student achievement in—and attitude toward—English essay writing. The study was influenced by earlier research reports indicating that the large class sizes prevalent in Nigerian schools may be detrimental to student academic and emotional well-being. The study employed an ex post facto research design, as no attempt was made to alter the pre-existing conditions in the schools. Three hundred and thirty-five (335) Senior Secondary School 2 students from nine purposively selected schools participated in the study. An achievement test in essay writing ($r = 0.7$); attitude toward essay writing questionnaire ($r = 0.72$); and self-esteem questionnaire ($r = 0.84$) were the instruments used for data collection. The data collected were analyzed using analysis of covariance. All hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance. Results showed that there was a significant effect of class size on student achievement in essay writing, whereas class size had no significant effect on attitude toward essay writing. Results also showed that there was no significant effect of self-esteem on student achievement in—and attitude toward—essay writing. Based on these findings, it was recommended that the government should ensure that classrooms are not overcrowded.

Keywords: *Class size, essay writing, learning outcomes, self esteem*

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Introduction

Student achievement in English language acquisition and essay writing has been persistently poor in Nigerian elementary schools. The problem has been attributed to factors, such as (a) student attitude toward writing; (b) teacher methodology; (c) poor infrastructure; and (d) lack of resources. Factors, such as class size and a student's level of self-esteem, may play a role in determining student achievement in essay writing. Large class sizes make it impossible for a teacher to give writing tasks and provide feedback on essays to students as frequently as recommended. Even when teachers manage to give writing tasks to students, it may take several weeks for them to assess student drafts appropriately. As a result of the number of students in large classes, many students may not have their essays marked or receive feedback on grammar, punctuation, cohesion, or

flow. Even when essays are diligently marked, the number of corrections has been shown to discourage students from future writing tasks. In situations like this, the right dose of self-esteem might inspire students to engage in the iterative review process. This study therefore examined the effect of class size and self-esteem on student achievement in—and attitude toward—essay writing.

Literature Review

Writing, as an expressive language skill, is crucial to student academic success. Fakeye and Ogunyemi (2010) affirmed that competence in writing is a prerequisite for student academic success. The majority of postsecondary examinations are conducted through the medium of writing, and students must be able to respond clearly to examination questions through writing for them to record any meaningful success. Students who cannot clearly articulate what they know, in writing, may not do well on public examinations. Kim et al. (2021) agreed that writing skills help individuals identify what they know and what they do not know about whatever they are trying to learn. Javadi-Safa (2018) was more assertive on the importance of writing skills when he pointed out that weak writing skills may put student academic success at risk. Despite the importance of writing in the teaching/learning process, Kolawole (1998) found that the teaching of essay writing in Nigerian schools is beset with many problems, including inadequate periods of teaching; ineffective methods of teaching; poor quality and qualifications of teachers; lack of adequate and useful facilities; excessive workload for teachers; excessive class size; deficits in student academic ability; and negative attitudes on the part of both teachers and students toward essay writing, among other issues.

An important factor that has been found to affect the teaching of essay writing is the attitude toward it. Attitudes are positive or negative feelings that an individual holds about objects or ideas. Studies have shown that positive attitudes enhance student performance in the learning of a second language, whereas negative attitudes inhibit performance (Adebiyi, 2006; Bulut, 2017; Fakeye, 2010; Kolawole, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Ogunyemi, 2014; Oladunjoye, 2004). Oladunjoye (2004) asserted that a positive attitude on the part of the learner will most likely lead to high competence, while a negative attitude will likely bring about marginal competence. Fakeye (2010) and Ogunyemi (2014), in separate studies, reported a positive relationship between student attitude and achievement in the English language. To them, student performance in second language learning depended largely on their attitude toward the learning material and the instructional strategy. Bulut (2017) also submitted that attitude and self-efficacy belief are the two of the most important factors affecting writing achievement. Bulut contended that these factors influence student performance because they determine the choices made, the amount of effort given, and the level of perseverance and anxiety felt by students when faced with writing difficulties. This implies that the strategy the teacher employs must elicit a positive attitude from students. It also implies that the teaching/learning environment must be one that will elicit positive attitudes from the learners. One important environmental factor that must be taken care of is class size.

Classroom factors can negatively affect learner achievement if ignored. Kusi and Manful (2019) observed that large class sizes constitute one of the problems that developing countries, including Nigeria, have been grappling with. According to the World Bank (2020), most African nations have higher teacher–student ratios than other developed nations. Nigeria, Angola, Chad, Cameroon, and Rwanda have average teacher–student ratios of 1:40, 1:50, 1:57, 1:45, and 1:60, respectively. European nations, such as Belgium, France, Greece, and Denmark, have average teacher–student ratios of 1:11, 1:18, 1:9, and 1:11, respectively. In Asian countries, such as China, Indonesia, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, the average teacher–student ratios are 1:13, 1:17, 1:17, and 1:14, respectively. Fabunmi et al. (2007) pointed out that classroom congestion and a low classroom utilization rate are common features of secondary schools in Nigeria. This situation has a negative impact on secondary school teacher productivity, student learning input, and secondary school student academic performance. Fabunmi et al. are of the opinion that a lower teacher–pupil ratio allows for more effective communication

between the learner and the teacher. Kusi and Manful also supported this assertion by pointing out that class size affects classroom management and classroom instruction, as well as student academic achievement.

Shahzad and Khan (2020) pointed out that teachers in overcrowded classrooms face a lot of challenges that make it impossible for them to give full attention to students. Kolawole (1998) noted that teachers faced with large class sizes only teach about essay writing rather than engaging students in actual writing and iterative review. Even when students manage to write essays, their essays do not undergo feedback and revision due to time constraints. When the class size is large, if the teacher is willing to give feedback, the review process is too short to allow for full revision and resubmission. Teachers who work to provide anchored feedback are also challenged to provide the level of interpersonal relationship with their students that is required to ensure that learning occurs.

Asikhia (2010) reported that the secondary school learning environment may contribute to the poor academic performance of students. Too large a population of students in a classroom does not create good conditions for learning, and this can lead to poor academic performance of students. Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Iyamu (2006) observed that most secondary schools are overcrowded and that teachers have little or no room to move around to give individual attention to students. Adeyemi (2008) explored the influence of class size on the quality of output in secondary schools in Nigeria and found that class size is a critical factor in determining the quality of output from secondary schools in Nigeria. Students in schools with small class sizes had better quality of output than students in schools with large class sizes. Increased class size might lower students' level of achievement (Adimonyemma et al., 2018; Chatterji & Lin, 2018; Maloney, 2020; Oderinde, 2003). Fabunmi et al. (2007) investigated the extent to which class factors, such as class size, student classroom space, and class utilization rate, determined the performance of secondary school students. Findings from the study revealed that class factors significantly determine secondary school student academic performance.

Abioye (2010) also pointed out that an overcrowded classroom is one of the major factors affecting language learning. This is because a teacher has to contend with a crowd of students who have high expectations concerning how the teacher meets their individual learning needs but may have a very low level of motivation. In his opinion, a large class confronts a teacher with students who have varying degrees of background knowledge, concepts of learning, motivation, interests, abilities, language learning skills, levels of competence, and levels of learning speed. All these factors make it difficult for the teacher to provide for the individual learning needs and aspirations of each student. When a class is large, it may be difficult for the teacher to effectively control it.

Although the studies reviewed (above) show that the lower the class size or teacher–pupil ratio, the higher the student achievement, Fabunmi et al. (2007) contended that the relationship between class size and academic performance remains a major controversy and a subject for further research. This is because other scholars (Ibrahim, 1992; Machado & Vera-Hernandez, 2008), in separate studies, found little or no effect of class size on student academic achievement.

Machado and Vera-Hernandez (2008) opined that class size could have either positive or negative effects on student academic achievement. To them, a small class size presents the teacher with an opportunity to interact closely with students, individualize instruction, and ensure better classroom management. Large classes, in this regard, might be prone to disruption occasioned by frequent disturbances from students and subsequent punishment by teachers. On the other hand, large classes may be beneficial to students because they give room for tougher competition among them. A competitive class assists in bringing out the best in individual learners. A large class also makes it possible for students to learn from their peers. When a student asks a question, other students can benefit from the explanation given by the teacher. This no doubt facilitates learning.

As the preceding review indicates, the literature on the influence of class size on academic achievement remains inconclusive. To this end, this study was conducted to determine the effects of class size on student achievement in—and attitude toward—essay writing.

Another variable that was of interest was student self-esteem. Coopersmith (1967) defined self-esteem as a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that individuals hold toward themselves. To him, self-esteem is a subjective experience that the individual conveys to others by verbal reports and other overt expressive behavior. It is the extent to which individuals believe in themselves. In a similar vein, Blascovich and Tomaka (1991) described self-esteem as individuals' sense of their value or worth, or the extent to which people value, approve of, appreciate, prize, or like themselves. In the opinion of Harris (2009), self-esteem is an internal belief system that individuals possess about themselves. In a broad sense, it could be described as the disposition that one has when dealing with people in the environment. Simply put, it is one's belief in one's ability. In his own contribution, Branden (1994) defined self-esteem as a standard by which people judge themselves. He stated further that there are six pillars of self-esteem: the practice of conscious living, the practice of self-acceptance, the practice of self-responsibility, the practice of self-assertiveness, the practice of purposeful living, and the practice of personal integrity. Okonkwo (2021) in her own contribution, described self-esteem as a person's overall sense of self-worth or personal value.

Brown (2000) identified three types of self-esteem: global, situational or specific, and task self-esteem. Global self-esteem is derived from the accumulation of inter- and intrapersonal experiences, and from assessments that people make of the external world. Park and Lee (2004) described this as the general assessment that one makes of one's own worth or value over time and across different situations. Situational or specific self-esteem deals with one's personal appraisal in certain life events or one's self-appraisal regarding specific traits, such as intelligence and athletic ability, or particular situations such as education, work, and home (Park & Lee, 2004). Task self-esteem refers to the evaluations that an individual makes of specific situations. For instance, in the language teaching/learning process, task self-esteem could be one's self-evaluation of a particular aspect of the acquisition process, such as speaking, writing, reading, or listening.

Self-esteem has a great influence on language learning. Studies have shown that students who have higher levels of self-esteem achieve more success in second language learning (Akunne & Anyamene, 2021; Brown, 2000; Heyde, 1983; Nougueras, 1996; Okonkwo, 2021; Park & Lee, 2004; Subon et al., 2020; Yang & McCarthy, 2005). Brown (2000) described self-esteem as an important variable in second language learning. He argued that no successful language acquisition can take place without some degree of self-esteem. Yang and McCarthy (2005) found in their study that students who have higher levels of self-esteem are more successful in second language learning, while students with low self-esteem have poor language learning ability.

Heyde (1983) examined the relationship between three levels of self-esteem and student oral performance in a second language. The results of the study revealed that all three levels of self-esteem correlated positively with oral performance. Park and Lee (2004) also found in their study that there is a significant effect of self-esteem on second language learners' oral performance. The higher the students' level of self-esteem, the higher oral performance they showed. In another study by Carr et al. (1991), it was reported that self-esteem is a significant predictor of reading awareness. Covington (1989) also reported that as students' level of self-esteem increases, their level of academic achievement also increases, and as the level of self-esteem decreases, academic achievement also decreases. Akunne and Anyamene (2021) and Okonkwo (2021) found in their separate studies that self-esteem positively correlates with student achievement in language studies.

Most of the earlier studies on self-esteem and language learning, as reviewed above, examined the relationship between self-esteem and oral production tasks. This is because scholars viewed oral production tasks as posing a greater potential for damaging students' self-esteem in the process of second language learning (Kazumata, 2011). To him, unlike oral production tasks, reading and writing tasks normally allow

students enough time to organize sentences and to find the most appropriate words. It must be noted, however, that in an examination situation, such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), students are expected to write a long essay within a short time. As a result of this, they may not have “enough” time to produce appropriate essays. In this type of situation, positive self-esteem may likely assist the student in the writing task at hand. Semke, 1984, as cited in Ogunyemi (2014), also observed that when students worked diligently on an essay, too many error corrections could send a discouraging message to the students and thereby lead to the formation of a negative attitude toward essay writing. In this regard, positive self-esteem may provide the necessary impetus to diligently rework an essay.

Ebata (2008) and Bulut (2017) reported that self-esteem is the most significant affective variable in language learning. They pointed out that self-esteem creates in learners a drive to acquire the target language, enjoy the learning process, and experience real communication in the target language. It is evident that self-esteem is an important variable in second language learning that cannot be neglected. Thus, the present study also examined the effect of self-esteem on student achievement in—and attitude toward—essay writing.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses guided the study:

Ho1: There is no significant effect of class size on student achievement in essay writing.

Ho2: There is no significant effect of class size on student attitude toward essay writing.

Ho3: There is no significant effect of self-esteem on student achievement in essay writing.

Ho4: There is no significant effect of self-esteem on student attitude toward essay writing.

Ho5: There is no significant interaction effect of class size and self-esteem on student achievement in essay writing.

Ho6: There is no significant interaction effect of class size and self-esteem on student attitude toward essay writing.

Methods

Research Design

The study employed an ex post facto research design. This is because no attempt was made to alter the existing conditions in the various schools used for the study.

Participants

Participants for this study were Senior Secondary School 2 (SSS2) students in Ogun East Senatorial District of Ogun State, Nigeria. Nine secondary schools were purposively selected from the senatorial district. Three of the schools had large class sizes with a combined population of 167 students, another three had medium class sizes with a combined population of 107 students, and the remaining three had small class sizes with a combined population of 61 students.

Instruments

Three main instruments were used for data collection. These were an achievement test in essay writing ($r = 0.7$); attitude toward essay writing questionnaire ($r = 0.72$); and self-esteem questionnaire ($r = 0.84$). The self-esteem questionnaire was used to group students in each class into three categories: high self-esteem, average self-esteem, and low self-esteem.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The three instruments were administered to all students in the three groups as a pretest, after which students in all the classes were taught the same topics in essay writing for a period of 6 weeks using the same methods and materials. The instructional package for this study was based on 10 essay topics covering all types of essay writing. The lecture method was used to teach students in the three groups for a period of 6 weeks using three instructional periods per week. The lecture method was favored for the study because studies had shown that it is the most preferred teaching method in Nigerian schools. At the end of the teaching, the achievement test in essay writing and the attitude to essay writing questionnaire were re-administered to all the students as a posttest. The data collected were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). All hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant effect of class size on student achievement in essay writing.

Table 1: Summary of ANCOVA Displaying the Significant Main and Interaction Effects of Class Size and Self-Esteem on Student Achievement in Essay Writing

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	12759.44	27	472.57	90.39	.000
Pre-achievement	6823.87	1	6823.87	1305.25	.000
Class size	165.40	2	82.69	15.82	.000
Self-esteem	13.11	2	6.55	1.25	.287
Class size * Self-esteem	25.66	4	6.42	1.23	.299
Error	1604.99	307	5.23		
Total	14364.44	334			

*Significant at $p < .05$.

Table 1 shows that there is a significant main effect of class size on student achievement in essay writing ($F_{(2,307)} = 15.818, p < .05$). Hence, Hypothesis 1 is rejected. The multiple classification analysis, in Table 2, further shows that students from the small class had the highest posttest achievement mean score (grand mean $22.25 + 1.21 = 23.46$), followed by students from the medium-size class (grand mean $22.25 + 0.26 = 22.51$), while students from the large class had the lowest mean score (grand mean $22.25 - 0.98 = 21.27$).

Table 2: Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) of Posttest Achievement Scores of Students by Class Size and Self-Esteem

Variation + Category	<i>N</i>	Adjusted variation	Eta	Adjusted for independent covariate deviation	Beta
Grand mean = 22.25					
Class size			.26		.14
1. Large class size	167	-1.80		-.98	
2. Average class size	107	.31		.26	
3. Small class size	61	2.26		1.21	
Self-esteem			.22		.05
1. Low self-esteem	103	-.88		.13	
2. Average self-esteem	149	-.62		-.35	
3. High self-esteem	83	2.72		-.54	
Multiple <i>R</i> -squared					.88
Multiple <i>R</i>					.94

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant effect of class size on student attitude toward essay writing.

Table 3: Summary of ANCOVA Displaying the Significant Main and Interaction Effects of Class Size and Self-Esteem on Students' Attitude Toward Essay Writing

Source	Type III sum of squares	<i>df</i>	Mean square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Corrected model	13726.67	27	508.39	14.96	.000
Pre-attitude	10117.41	1	10117.41	297.70	.000
Class size	7.01	2	3.50	.103	.902
Self-esteem	169.02	2	84.51	2.49	.085
Class size * Self-esteem	180.15	4	45.04	1.33	.260
Error	10433.32	307	33.99		
Total	24159.99	334			

*Significant at $p < .05$.

Table 3 shows that there is no significant main effect of class size on student attitude toward essay writing ($F_{(2,307)} = .103, p > .05$). Hence, Hypothesis 2 is not rejected. Table 4 shows that students from the small class had the highest posttest attitude score (grand mean $61.99 + 0.8 = 62.79$), followed by students from the large class (grand mean $61.99 + 0.5 = 62.49$), while students from the medium-size class had the lowest attitude mean score (grand mean $61.99 - 0.11 = 61.88$). These differences are, however, not significant.

Table 4: Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) of Post-Attitudinal Scores of Students by Class Size and Self-Esteem

Variation + Category	<i>N</i>	Adjusted variation	Eta	Adjusted for independent covariate deviation	Beta
Grand mean = 61.99					
Class size			.13		.01
1. Large class size	167	1.27		.05	
2. Average class size	107	-1.16		-.11	
3. Small class size	61	-.48		.08	
Self-esteem			.25		.11
1. Low self-esteem	103	-2.42		-.84	
2. Average self-esteem	149	2.20		1.00	
3. High self-esteem	83	-.90		-.80	
Multiple <i>R</i> -squared					3.53
Multiple <i>R</i>					.73

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant main effect of self-esteem on student achievement in essay writing.

Table 1 indicates that there is no significant main effect of self-esteem on student achievement in essay writing ($F_{(2,307)} = 1.25, p > .05$). Hence, Null Hypothesis 3 is not rejected. Meanwhile, Table 2 shows that students with high self-esteem had the highest posttest achievement mean score (grand mean $22.25 + 0.54 = 22.79$), followed by students with low self-esteem (grand mean $22.25 + 0.13 = 22.38$), while students with an average level of self-esteem had the lowest mean score (grand mean $22.25 - 0.35 = 21.9$). This difference is, however, not significant.

Hypothesis 4: There is no significant main effect of self-esteem on student attitude toward essay writing.

Table 3 shows that there is no significant main effect of self-esteem on student attitude toward essay writing ($F_{(2,307)} = 2.49, p > .05$). Therefore, Null Hypotheses 4 is not rejected. The multiple classification analysis in Table 4 shows that students with average self-esteem had the highest attitude score (grand mean $61.99 + 1.00 = 62.99$), followed by students with high self-esteem (grand mean $61.99 - 0.80 = 61.19$), while students with low self-esteem had the lowest attitude score (grand mean $61.99 - 0.84 = 61.15$). However, this difference is not significant.

Hypothesis 5: There is no significant interaction effect of class size and self-esteem on student achievement in essay writing.

Table 1 shows that there is no significant interaction effect of class size and self-esteem on student achievement in essay writing ($F_{(4,307)} = 1.23, p > .05$). Hence, Null Hypothesis 5 is not rejected.

Hypothesis 6: There is no significant interaction effect of class size and self-esteem on student attitude toward essay writing.

The result from Table 3 show that there is no significant interaction effect of class size and self-esteem on student attitude toward essay writing ($F_{(4,307)} = 1.33, p > .05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 6 is not rejected.

Discussion

This study was designed to examine the effects of class size and self-esteem on student achievement in—and attitude toward—essay writing. Results of the study showed that there is a significant main effect of class size on student achievement in essay writing. Students in the small class had the highest achievement mean score, followed by students in the medium-size class, while students in the large class had the lowest mean score. The difference in the achievement scores of students in the three groups is statistically significant. However, class size has no significant effect on student attitude toward essay writing.

The result corroborates the findings of Abioye (2010), Adeyemi (2008), Bakasa (2011), Blatchford et al. (2011), Chatterji and Lin (2018), Fabunmi et al. (2007), Maloney (2020), Oderinde (2003), and Shahzad and Khan (2020). These scholars reported that students in small classes have better quality of output than students in large classes. This implies that class size is a critical factor that can influence student achievement in essay writing. However, the findings of the study negate the findings of Kornfeld (2010), Machado and Vera-Hernandez (2008), and Owoeye and Yara (2011). These scholars, in their separate studies, discovered that class size had little or no effect on student academic achievement. The positive effect of class on achievement, as recorded in this study, may be due to the fact that teachers of students in the small classes interacted better with the students, paid more attention to individual learner problems, and interacted more with student scripts than teachers of students in large classes.

The results of the study also revealed that self-esteem has no significant effect on student achievement in—and attitude toward—essay writing. This is contrary to expectations and contrary to earlier findings on the positive effect of self-esteem on language learning in general. It contradicts the findings of Akunne and Anyamene (2021), Okonkwo (2021), Subon et al. (2020), Ebata (2008), Yang and McCarthy (2005), and Park and Lee (2004), who reported that students with a higher level of self-esteem achieved more success in language learning. It also contradicts the findings of Nougueras (1996), Carr et al. (1991), Covington (1989), and Heyde (1983), who found that self-esteem is a significant predictor of academic achievement. The findings of the present study have shown that, as a moderating variable, self-esteem has little or nothing to do with student achievement in—and attitude toward—essay writing.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The results of the study have shown that class size may have a significant effect on student achievement in essay writing. A smaller class size may provide a more effective teaching and learning environment. Reducing the number of student essays that require feedback from the teacher could contribute to student achievement in English language and essay writing, in particular. Because the study has shown that a reduction in the number of students per class could lead to greater academic achievement, the government and other stakeholders in education should consider a reduction in the number of students per class in Nigerian schools.

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